

AMENDMENTS TO THE CLAIMS

1. (Currently amended) *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain, as deposited on May 29, 2002 under the accession number LMG P-21524[[,]] ~~encoding~~ that produces exopolysaccharide ~~production~~.

2. (Currently amended) A functional starter culture comprising the ~~an~~ exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain of Claim 1.

3. (Currently amended) A co-culture comprising the ~~an~~ exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain of Claim 1.

4. (Currently amended) A method of producing high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2×10^6 ~~$2 \cdot 10^6$~~ Daltons during fermentation comprising fermenting the functional starter culture according to claim 2.

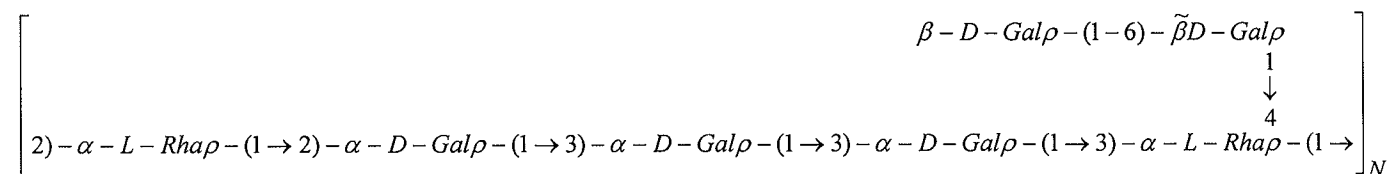
5. (Previously presented) A method of fermentation of a food product comprising adding the functional starter culture according to claim 2 to the food product.

6. (Withdrawn) A method for preparing an exopolysaccharide comprising culturing an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain in a medium comprising milk and lactalbumin hydrolysate.

7. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 6, wherein said medium further comprises at least one additional mono-or disaccharide.

8. (Withdrawn, currently amended) A method according to Claim 6 characterized in that at least 60 % or 80 % by weight of said exopolysaccharide has a molecular mass of at least 2×10^6 ~~$2 \cdot 10^6$~~ Daltons.

9. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 6 characterized in that said exopolysaccharide has the following structure:



wherein N is between 800 and 7000.

10. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 7 wherein said monosaccharide is selected from the group consisting of glucose, galactose or fructose.

11. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 7 wherein said disaccharide is sucrose.

12. (Withdrawn) A method according to Claim 6 wherein a *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain, as deposited on May 29, 2002 under the accession number LMG P-21524, encoding exopolysaccharide production is used.

13. (Withdrawn, currently amended) A high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2×10^6 Daltons obtainable by the method of Claim 6.

14. (Withdrawn) A method for improving the texture of a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

15. (Withdrawn) A method for improvement of water retention in a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

16. (Withdrawn) A method for decreasing syneresis of a fermented product comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

17. (Withdrawn) A method for improvement of water retention during the fermentation process comprising adding at the start of or during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1.

18. (Withdrawn) A method for producing a dairy product comprising adding to the initial dairy product starter culture or adding during the fermentation process, a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain according to Claim 1.

19. (Currently amended) A method of producing high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2×10^6 Daltons in food fermentation processes comprising adding a functional starter culture or coculture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain according to claim 1 ~~to~~ to said food at the start or during the food fermentation process.

20. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 5 wherein said food product is a dairy product.

21. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 20 wherein said dairy product is selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark and kefir.

22. (Withdrawn) A dairy product obtainable by the method of claim 14.

23. (Withdrawn) A dairy product according to Claim 22 which is a Mozzarella cheese.

24. (Withdrawn) A functional starter culture for the fermentation of a yoghurt comprising a culture of the *Streptococcus thermophilus* ST 111 strain of Claim 1 and a culture of *Lactobacillus delbrueckii subsp. bulgaricus*.

25. (Withdrawn, currently amended) A method of using a high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2×10^6 Daltons ~~$2 \cdot 10^6$~~ according to Claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product.

26. (Withdrawn, currently amended) A method of using a high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2×10^6 Daltons ~~$2 \cdot 10^6$~~ according to Claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product for improving water retention of the food product.

27. (Withdrawn, currently amended) A method of using a high-molecular-mass exopolysaccharide of at least 2×10^6 Daltons ~~$2 \cdot 10^6$~~ according to claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product for decreasing syneresis.

28. (Withdrawn) A method of using an exopolysaccharide according to Claim 13 as an additive to a fermented or non-fermented food product for improving the texture of said food product.

29. (Withdrawn) The method according to Claim 25 wherein said food product is selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, soups, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark, kefir and sauces.

30. (Withdrawn, currently amended) A functional starter culture comprising an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain for the production of high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2×10^6 ~~$2 \cdot 10^6$~~ Daltons during fermentation.

31. (Withdrawn, currently amended) A co-culture comprising an exopolysaccharide-producing lactic acid bacterial strain for the production of high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2×10^6 ~~$2 \cdot 10^6$~~ Daltons during fermentation.

32. (Currently amended) A method of producing high-molecular-mass heteropolysaccharides of at least 2×10^6 ~~2×10^6~~ Daltons during fermentation comprising fermenting the co-culture according to claim 3.

33. (Previously presented) A method for the fermentation of a food product comprising adding the co-culture according to Claim 3 to the food product.

34. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 33 wherein said food product is a dairy product.

35. (Previously presented) The method according to Claim 34 wherein said dairy product is selected from the group consisting of milk products, fermented milk drinks, yoghurts, cheeses, sour cream, whipped toppings, quark and kefir.

36. (Withdrawn) A dairy product obtainable by the method of claim 18.

37. (Withdrawn) A dairy product according to Claim 36 which is a Mozzarella cheese.

38. (New) A method of fermentation of a yoghurt comprising adding the functional starter culture according to claim 2 to the yoghurt.

39. (New) A method of fermentation of Mozzarella Cheese comprising adding the co-culture according to claim 3 to the Mozzarella Cheese.